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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MINSK 000460

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SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH DISCUSSES STATE OF THE OPPOSITION

REF: MINSK 436

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In an April 24 conversation with Ambassador, Belarusian opposition leader and former Ten plus Coalition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich described tensions within the democratic forces. He named United Civic Party leader Anatoliy Lebedko as the strongest dissenter. Contending Lebedko and his supporters are calling for more radical, confrontational measures to secure rapid democratic change, Milinkevich asserted he and the majority of the coalition partners believe a less confrontational, more grassroots, information-based approach would prove more effective in persuading the majority of Belarusians to support democratic change. Milinkevich assessed his support among the population at 25-30 percent - still not large enough to bring about change via large public demonstrations. He claimed his goal is to build support among the population that rejects "revolution" but wants change. He was confident this strategy would see Lukashenko out of office before his new five year term expires. Milinkevich complained about Lithuanian and Georgian pressure on the opposition to adopt a more confrontational approach. He asked the USG to reexamine its democracy assistance to Belarus to allow more direct assistance to the opposition in the form of salaries and publication materials and equipment and less out-of-country seminars, trainings and conferences. End Summary

Milinkevich Doing Great Abroad(

¶2. (C) Belarusian opposition leader and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich asked to meet Ambassador at short notice on April 24. Milinkevich had just returned from a two day trip to Norway. He was very satisfied with the results of this trip noting his meetings with the Norwegian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and other high-ranking officials were constructive and received positive press coverage. He also noted the U.S. Ambassador to Oslo was gracious enough to host a productive reception for him. Milinkevich stressed the Norwegians did not need to be convinced of the need to provide assistance to the Belarusian opposition; they were focused on hearing from the Ten Plus leader specific programs and initiatives the Norwegian government could support. Milinkevich promised the Norwegian officials the coalition would develop a comprehensive action plan for promoting democratic change by May 1. Milinkevich told Ambassador the Norwegians agreed their assistance would be funneled through the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, which has long been active in Belarus especially in supporting civil society initiatives.

(But Not all Good on the Home Front?

13. (C) Ambassador noted he had been hearing concern from some in the coalition that Milinkevich may be spending too much time abroad and paying too little attention to tending to domestic scene. United Civic Party leader Anatoly Lebedko and others had recently told Ambassador they were dissatisfied with Milinkevich's leadership and the general direction (or lack thereof) of the coalition following the March 19 presidential elections (reftel).

14. (C) Milinkevich said he was well aware of these opinions. He acknowledged internal tensions exist in the coalition, but claimed the only serious problem is with Lebedko, who he claimed is promoting a confrontational approach to change. He asserted the rest of the coalition partners are united under his leadership and share the same non-confrontational approach and strategy to promoting democratic change in Belarus. Milinkevich noted the coalition's political council would meet later that day (April 24) to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign and agree on a common strategy ahead. He hoped Lebedko would participate and noted that since March 19 he and Lebedko had not been able to meet once as their schedules never could coincide. He pointed out he had hoped to meet Lebedko in Vilnius last week but Lebedko did not show up. (Note: Initial press reports indicate the political council members concluded the coalition performed satisfactorily before, during, and after the elections. However, apparently Lebedko did not participate.)

Milinkevich Satisfied With His Performance

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15. (C) Responding to criticism of his leadership March 19 and afterwards, Milinkevich admitted there were equally valid points of view on the appropriate level of confrontation with Belarusian authorities. He noted the more radical wing" of the coalition promoted ideas such as seizing the Belarusian TV station or Lukashenko's office building March 19. However, Milinkevich was convinced he made the right decision to promote only a peaceful, non-confrontational campaign.

16. (C) Milinkevich believes he won only 25 to 30 percent of the vote on March 19, and thus the majority of the population did not support the democratic opposition. He considered it would be "morally irresponsible" to promote a radical approach in such a context when the majority of Belarusians still remain unconvinced about the need for change. Moreover, Milinkevich assured his supporters in the run up to the election he would not lead them into open confrontation with the authorities. He contended the larger number of people who responded to his call to gather on October Square March 19 took the risk to participate as a result of his promise. They would not have followed a call to seize a building or set up tents. Milinkevich considered this non-confrontational approach during the campaign had been particularly successful in encouraging more Belarusians to lose their fear and support democratic change. He claimed roughly one-half of the demonstrators on October Square were from the regions. He attributed this to the coalition's focus on meeting with voters all over the country. Milinkevich maintained he always viewed these elections as an important catalyst for change but not the critical event that would topple Lukashenko.

Acknowledging Campaign Deficiencies

17. (C) Milinkevich commented that the majority of people who voted for him were really voting against Lukashenko and not for him. He admitted his campaign had failed to produce a program that would have convinced key elements in Belarusian society such as the nomenclature, teachers and others that the

democratic opposition is a viable alternative to Lukashenko. He claimed the coalition would now focus more on developing a "positive program" for the 2008 local elections.

Relations With Kozulin Remain Strained

¶8. (C) Milinkevich acknowledged his rival opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin and he have fundamentally different goals and personalities. According to Milinkevich, Kozulin's main objective is to boost his popular support ratings in order to be more competitive in the next presidential elections. Milinkevich, on the other hand, said his primary concern is to galvanize and broaden public support for democratic change. He pointed out he had disagreed with Kozulin's rash decision on March 25 to lead demonstrators to a violent collision with Belarusian security forces, despite explicit warnings from Milinkevich. He noted the coalition would continue to fight for Kozulin's release from detention, but Milinkevich did not envisage strong collaboration with Kozulin and his supporters.

Curbing the Vilnius-Tbilisi Axis

9 (C) Following his assessment of the election campaign and the coalition, Milinkevich asked that the USG use its influence to curb efforts by elements in the Lithuanian and Georgian governments who are pressuring the Belarusian opposition to conduct confrontational, revolutionary actions aimed at toppling Lukashenko. Although grateful for overall Lithuanian and Georgian support, Milinkevich expressed serious concern that key officials in the Lithuanian and Georgian governments played a counterproductive, divisive role in the election campaign and are continuing their efforts to manipulate the opposition.

¶10. (C) Milinkevich asserted these two countries made blatant efforts to export revolution to Belarus, including pressuring some coalition leaders to seize GOB installations. Milinkevich said he never wanted to be part of such activities, and added that he called on the Lithuanian ambassador in Belarus on the eve of the presidential elections to urge Vilnius not to promote potentially incendiary plans that would only discredit the opposition in the eyes of most Belarusians who are opposed to street violence and "revolution." Milinkevich contended the activities planned by elements in Vilnius and Tbilisi did not materialize mainly because they had recruited "inexperienced,

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unqualified" youth to carry them out.

¶11. (C) Milinkevich speculated that the recent Russian TV Channel One expose on alleged intercepted telephone conversations between Georgian and Lithuanian officials on possibly assassinating Milinkevich "may not be very far from the truth." He acknowledged that certain Lithuanian and Georgian officials are clearly unhappy with the outcome of the Belarusian elections and with his staunch resistance to their radical strategies.

Support Direct Assistance

¶12. (C) Milinkevich expressed appreciation for USG assistance to the coalition, noting the U.S. was by far the largest backer of opposition election efforts. However, with the elections over, Milinkevich recommended that the USG reexamine its approach to supporting democracy in a repressive country like Belarus. He understood current USG policy prohibits providing direct financial support to opposition activists but argued this approach is incompatible with Belarus' reality. Milinkevich stressed that most opposition activists are or will soon be unemployed, and such "bleak prospects" serve as a big disincentive to retain and

recruit activists. Milinkevich pointed out he was not necessarily arguing for an increase in U.S. democracy support; only that the U.S. consider changing its policy to allow direct funding of salaries for activists and to purchase needed supplies and equipment to wage the information campaign against the regime propaganda machine. He maintained the Belarusian opposition does not need more out-of-country seminars, trainings and conferences. They need the means to conduct their activities. On the information front he asserted the radio projects from Poland were "utterly useless" and a waste of money as no one in Belarus could listen to them. He fully understood the politics behind these radio projects and also felt TV is too pie-in-the-sky. Support to print media and internet, he stressed, is still the most cost-effective means to wage the information war in Belarus.

¶13. (C) Milinkevich said he would raise these issues during his encounters with leaders next week in Vilnius. He will stress to them that Belarus is not the "Czech Republic, Ukraine, or Serbia," but more like Poland prior to its democratic transition. (Note: On April 27, Milinkevich was arrested for organizing an unsanctioned demonstration on April 26 and was sentenced to 15 days in jail. Thus, most likely he will not be in Vilnius for the Vice President's visit.)

¶14. (C) Ambassador encouraged Milinkevich to think about creating a Belarusian coordination center abroad perhaps in Brussels, as the Poles had done after martial law. Such an office run by a Belarusian with authority within the opposition could ensure Belarus remains a prominent issue on the European agenda as well as help coordinate, attract and organize support from the international community. Currently donor countries and NGOs continue to compete with each other and with various opposition factions, although the donor community has tried itself to develop more coordination. But the Belarusian democratic opposition needs to take control of and lead its future rather than look for leadership from abroad. Milinkevich readily agreed this would be an excellent development but lamented he could think of no Belarusian who could run such a center at this time. He thought he could find some Poles who could perform this function out of Warsaw but recognized such a center needed to be run by a Belarusian and also that Warsaw is not a media capital.

Milinkevich Needs To Take A Break

¶15. (C) Milinkevich admitted he was extremely tired. He hoped to return to Poland in May to continue his rehabilitation treatment following his early 2005 kidney surgery and then return to Belarus for a much-needed break.

Comment

¶16. (C) Milinkevich appeared in good spirits, optimistic and realistic about the prospects for change in Belarus following the elections. He did not seem too terribly worried about a challenge to his leadership from Lebedko himself but is worried about Lithuanian and Georgia efforts to undermine him and split the opposition in favor of Lebedko. He seems to

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have gotten the message on the need to tend to the home fires more, but it is clear he is physically tired and needs to recharge his batteries if he is to continue lead the charge. Interestingly, Milinkevich made no mention of the coalition's plans to organize and promote the April 26 Chernobyl march. His point about providing more direct assistance is a valid one and should be seriously considered.
Krol